

THE SUNSTONE REVIEW

Volume 1

Number 3



Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character

Fawn M. Brodie W. W. Norton & Co., 1981 574 pages, \$18.95

BY DAVIS BITTON

MORMON readers have at least one and possibly two obstacles to overcome as they approach any book by Fawn M. Brodie, including *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character*, which she finished before her death last December. First, so great was the flap over her biography of Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History*, perceived by the faithful as an attack on their prophet and an act of disloyalty by a daughter of a prominent Utah family, that to this day many people know of nothing else that she has written. My unscientific survey has led to another conclusion: one need not have read that book to have strong opinions about it.

The other obstacle, at least for many, is Brodie's tendency to produce what are now known as psychobiographies—the biographer, like a psychotherapist, examines small clues as he or she tries to make sense of the subject's personality and character. I have mixed feelings about the genre. I would hate to lose some of the compelling insights that emerge, say, in Erik H. Erikson's *Young Man Luther* and other works that utilize psychological tools of analysis. On the other hand, even the best of such works tend to be frustrating, less than totally convincing, and it is not hard to sympathize with readers who prefer their biographies "straight."

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